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RUEHMU/AMEMBASSY MANAGUA PRIORITY 1090
RUEHME/AMEMBASSY MEXICO PRIORITY 3639
RUEHOT/AMEMBASSY OTTAWA PRIORITY 0633
RUEHQT/AMEMBASSY QUITO PRIORITY 1894
RUEHSG/AMEMBASSY SANTIAGO PRIORITY 3377
RUEHDG/AMEMBASSY SANTO DOMINGO PRIORITY 0072
RUEHTC/AMEMBASSY THE HAGUE PRIORITY 0887
RUEHROV/AMEMBASSY VATICAN PRIORITY
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK PRIORITY 0034
RUEHMI/USOFFICE FRC FT LAUDERDALE PRIORITY 2934
RUMIAAA/HQ USSOUTHCOM MIAMI FL PRIORITY
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY
RUEHUB/USINT HAVANA PRIORITY 0590

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 CARACAS 000785

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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR GETS DELAYED BY PROTESTERS IN GUARICO
STATE

Classified By: Robert Downes, Political Counselor,
for Reason 1.4(b).

Summary

¶1. (C) Ambassador Brownfield and Emboffs were tracked by an aggressive and ultimately violent group of protesters on March 22 during an outreach trip to the state of Guarico (though there were no injuries to Embassy personnel). A noon-hour press conference and lunch at a local club dragged into a four-hour wait after more than 100 protesters blocked the exit and burned tires and a facsimile of a U.S. flag. State police agreed to lift the siege only if the Ambassador abandoned the two remaining important public events in the agenda, a donation at a school for autistic children and a USAID-sponsored youth baseball game. The state government appeared to give extensive logistical support to the protest, which was reportedly led by a National Assembly alternate deputy and counted on the participation of state government employees. We are having a positive impact with these outreach visit -- to the chagrin of the Bolivarians -- and we expect harassment to increase, as well as our financial costs with added security precautions, as we press on. End summary.

Notifying National and State Governments

¶2. (C) As part of the Ambassador's strategy to visit Venezuelan states regularly (every three to four weeks) to meet with political, social, and economic groups, the Embassy team (Ambassador, Poloff, IO, RSO, and USAID Director) visited Guarico capital San Juan de los Morros on March 22. Following existing protocol, the Embassy requested by diplomatic note assistance from the Foreign Ministry to arrange meetings with Guarico Governor Eduardo Manuitt and the local garrison commander. Copies of the diplomatic note were sent to the Vice Presidency, the Defense Ministry,

Governor Manuitt, and the local garrison commander. Embassy received written confirmation, which we requested, from the governor's office that Manuitt would not be in town March 22.

We also received a fax from the Minister of Defense and garrison commander stating that all requests for visits by foreigners to Venezuelan military bases must be submitted directly to President Hugo Chavez. RSO sent an FSN investigator the previous day to coordinate with Guarico state police and survey meeting sites. The state police told the FSN they were unable to provide a constant security escort for the Ambassador. RSO requested and received approval from the national civilian intelligence service (DISIP), which provides security for the U.S. Ambassador, to assign local DISIP for support the visit.

13. (C) The Fifth Republic Movement (MVR) mayor of San Juan's principal municipality initially accepted the request for a meeting enthusiastically, but his office subsequently regretted, citing "unavoidable conflicts" with the mayor's schedule. (Note: Guarico is a vast agricultural state south of Caracas that has an overwhelming pro-Chavez majority. Patria Para Todos (PPT) holds the governorship and two of Guarico's five National Assembly deputies. Manuitt has repeatedly clashed with the MVR in Guarico over turf issues during his seven-year rule, and has popularity problems both with Chavez supporters and critics.)

Initial Meetings Meet With Resistance

14. (C) After the cancellation by the MVR mayor, Embassy asked the local Accion Democratica (AD) secretary general to

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organize a meeting of municipal council members from around the state. At our specific request, the AD secgen also invited the MVR council members from San Juan de los Morros, who chose not to attend the meeting. The secretary general of COPEI (Christian Democrats) and other opposition labor and political leaders also joined the meeting. After the session began, a group of 20 protesters appeared with hand-painted signs saying "Get Out Of Guarico, Yankee!" Some of the demonstrators were still wearing their Guarico state government employee badges. The group was vitriolic peaceful, though some protesters slapped the Ambassador's vehicle as it pulled away. Later in the day, we were informed by AD leaders that after the Ambassador's departure, the demonstrators returned to the AD building, threw rocks to break the windows, and generally vandalized the building.

15. (C) The demonstrators followed the Ambassador to the next meeting at the Vicar General's office, maintaining their noisy demonstration. At one point, protesters threw an object at the Ambassador's waiting vehicle that caused no damage. The Monsignor took advantage of the group assembled out front to conduct the Ambassador on a tour of the adjoining elementary school, ushering the Ambassador safely out the rear exit to a waiting car. (Note: During the three meetings, we noted a DISIP official taking pictures of the Ambassador with meeting participants. When challenged, the official said it was for the local office's records of VIP support.)

Showdown At The Italian Club

16. (C) The Guarico chapter of FEDECAMARAS hosted a lunch, preceded by a press conference, at the Italian-Venezuelan Center some 20 minutes from the downtown area where the morning protests had taken place. After the Embassy team's arrival at 12:20 p.m. (except for the USAID director, who was advancing the afternoon's agenda), the demonstrators showed up, apparently ferried in by government authorities, and blocked the Club's only exit and adjoining street. A few

state police officers were on hand but took few actions to control the crowd. By 1:30 p.m., the group swelled to more than a hundred, augmented by a group of students, presumably the ones who had vandalized AD headquarters earlier. The students shook the front gate of the club violently, mounted the guard post, and burned a facsimile of a U.S. flag. They also lobbed a burning tire over the gate into the parking lot and set off firecrackers. The protesters chanted profanities and vulgarities, including one that called for the Ambassador to be put in front of a firing squad. (Ambassador declined the invitation.) Much of the protest was caught on tape as half of Guarico's press corps was trapped inside with the Ambassador.

17. (C) At 3:00 p.m., the deputy state police chief arrived to assess the situation. With him were two state prosecutors who had come to negotiate with the protesters. Authorities had hoped that the National Guard, which has the most experience with anti-riot operations, would come and disperse the crowd (which had by then shrunk to about 25 people sitting in front of the entry). We were told later, however, that a prison riot elsewhere in the state, which we have had difficulty confirming, precluded the National Guard from intervening on our behalf. The deputy police chief reported that there were two buses of students driving around town following the Embassy team who were prone to "violent aggression." They had been spotted, he added, near the radio station where the Ambassador was scheduled to give an interview (which he later gave by telephone out of concern for the station's physical security). The deputy police chief told the Ambassador that the state police could negotiate his exit from the Italian Club, but could not

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guarantee the Ambassador's safety for the rest of the agenda. The deputy police chief recommended that the Ambassador depart the state as soon as possible.

18. (C) At 3:50 p.m., State Police Chief (and active duty National Guard colonel) Domingo Moncada arrived, accompanied by a lawyer from the state human rights ombudsman's office (Defensoria del Pueblo). Moncada told the Ambassador, on camera, that he could arrange the immediate departure of the Ambassador, but only if he agreed to depart the state (San Juan de los Morros is ten minutes from the state border). Ambassador, on camera, lamented that a small minority was able to prevent him from visiting the autistic children's school and youth baseball game. The Ombudsman representative told the Ambassador she wanted to assure the rights of the protesters were not violated, at which point the Ambassador suggested that the rights of those trapped within the Club might be of concern to her as well. At 4:15 p.m., nearly four hours after arriving, the Embassy team left the Club, escorted to the state line by at least 30 state police, including six motorcycle escorts and three police vehicles.

Who Was Behind The Protests?

19. (C) It was apparent that the protests had the direct support of the state government. Specifically,

-- We observed (and took photos of) demonstrators wearing state and municipal employee credentials.

-- The pro-Chavez website "aporrea.org" said that National Assembly Alternate Deputy Maria Antonia Oropeza led the protest.

-- The state government reportedly provided transportation to the demonstrators. While we do not have solid proof of this, the ease with which the demonstrators moved around town, as well as past BRV practice, leads us to conclude the BRV in some form funded the buses.

-- Food was delivered to the protesters at around 3:30 p.m. Our DISIP security escorts said it was delivered by the state government. (At this point the well-nourished demonstrators began chanting, "You Won't Leave!" and told the police they were planning to stay for several more hours.)

-- Police Chief Moncada spent less than five minutes on the scene arranging our departure, suggesting his complicity with the protesters.

-- After telling us there were insufficient resources to escort the Ambassador throughout the day's agenda, the state government spun up an impressive escort only after the Ambassador agreed to leave the state.

Comment

¶10. (C) This is the third incident with protesters in six months encountered during Ambassadorial travel. The Embassy delegation was at no point subject to physical danger, though there were moments in which matters could have gotten out of hand. The Ambassador emphasized to international and national press the BRV's lack of security support, which played favorably by creating an impression of Venezuela as an unstable and unpredictable country. One thing is clear: the Bolivarians are increasingly uncomfortable with the Ambassador's outreach to the states. The travel campaign, designed to project a positive U.S. image broadly to Venezuelan civil society (and in the process cause some

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divisions within rank-and-file chavismo), is a winner and needs to continue. Of course, as after previous incidents we continue to re-evaluate and modify our security and logistical procedures to assure the safety of Embassy personnel, which will have resource implications.

BROWNFIELD